

Cultural Probes to create New Imaginaries of Masculinity: A Case study from HD Kote, Karnataka, India

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore various themes and opportunity areas related to the imaginaries of masculinity in adolescent boys in the HD Kote township of Karnataka, India.

Over multiple sessions we used theories and methods from “Queer” HCI, Feminist scholarship and design research to design participatory activities. These helped unearth the participants’ attitudes towards masculinity and gender stereotypes in addition to the various aggression/ violence-related stressors in their lives.

These proved useful in designing our final design interventions/inquiry, a prototype of which was tested in the final session. In the process of testing it, we garnered some important insights about applying participatory design methods to understand wicked problems.

Author Keywords

Participatory Design; Co-Design, Cultural Probes; Feminist HCI, Queer HCI, Masculinity; Adolescence

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where systems and institutions are designed by, and for, men [1]. Design research can use conceptual tools of feminism to critique core operational assumptions about users, and empower them to participate in discourses, markets and public spaces. [1] The fields of Queer Human Computer Interaction or HCI has explored *Queering tactics* that allow users to expose and question notions that they had originally taken for granted - by framing actions like mischief

and play as “guerilla tactics” that create spaces for divergent identities, and “resistance to fixed notions of gender or assignment of roles.” [2,3]. HCI can also create interactive and inclusive spaces for sharing - prior research has explored how efforts to raise awareness can create “communities of practice” where groups of individuals exchange knowledge and skills to address problems. [4]

Some of the most powerful methods for designers working in the field to understand audiences and their contexts are participatory methods, which link ethnographic field methods with design processes. These have the potential both to provide designers with a deeper understanding of user work practices, and to provide a context for designers to collaborate with users over the design of new technologies [5]

Another powerful method is a “Cultural probe” - a collection of tasks meant to elicit responses from people—not detailed information about their whole lives, but fragments and clues about their emotions, thoughts, and feelings. This can be done by asking participants to keep a diary of their emotions, record their dreams etc. [6]

Therefore this research uses participatory activities and cultural probes in order to understand the imaginaries of adolescents towards masculinity and gender stereotypes.

METHOD

The research was carried out in September and October 2018 in collaboration with IT For Change, a Bengaluru based NGO, as part of a capability-building programme to address the social and cultural roots of gender-based violence [7]. It aimed to collaboratively conceive multimedia artefacts to stimulate critical conversations and possible ways to facilitate alternative imaginations about masculinities among adolescent boys and young adults.

The research was conducted in the HD Kote township of Karnataka State, India as a 3 part engagement of a few hours each, with young male adolescents studying in the 8th grad and averaging 13 years of age, with a final engagement to test the prototypes, which were then documented and handed over to IT for Change for them to use in the future.

Mapping everyday lives

We started with ‘A day in a life’ activity that asked adolescents to assign an emotion they felt to a particular time of the previous day, and create a comic strip of their actions and thoughts around it. This acted as a “cultural probe” to inspire a conversation. Through this, we learnt more about other infrastructural aspects of their lives that influenced their imaginaries around masculinity e.g. media and regional films, cultural experiences at their home and neighbourhoods and low emotional self-awareness.

Spatial/Neighbourhood experiences

We realised that we did not have a spatial component to our exercise. We knew when they felt, what they felt, but where? was turning out to be equally, if not more important for our research. We then came up with the idea of a co-created neighbourhood map - where the boys would map out the emotions they felt and the actions they were doing in their neighbourhood. Along with this, they were also asked to map any associations they thought about the actions with being man or women. During this map-making activity, we used the data they generated as inputs to qualitative interviews - asking them why they associated a particular emotion with a particular place etc.



Figure 1. Participants working on “emotion maps” of their surroundings

The activity elicited many incidents of aggression from the participants. They mentioned getting into a bad mood while toiling in the fields with their parents

due the exertion and the heat. Other recounted incidents included scoldings from authority figures like parents or teachers for perceived wrong-doings. Our research also revealed many gendered perceptions and behaviour by our participants conditioned by stereotypes, characterising girls as delicate, fragile objects that could not perform hard labour, while at the same time labelling them as dangerous that they could “ruin” men.

Role-Playing Scenarios of Aggression:

Finally, we concluded with role-playing exercises of participant-generated scenarios of aggression. Participants were then prompted to talk about how they would have diffused or de-escalated the situation. The situations proposed by the re-enactment exercise turned out to be almost exclusively those where the boys were in adversarial positions vis-a-vis figures of authority like parents, elder siblings, teachers etc — and could not understand why they were being scolded or felt the scolding was unjust.

INSIGHT SYNTHESIS AND PROTOTYPE TESTING

Our main insights from the cultural probe - that the lack of a conversation around anger management and conflict resolution contributed to negative imaginaries of masculine behaviour - were synthesised to inform the design of our proposed interventions.

We developed two interventions - an ‘emotion curriculum’ consisting of various participatory activities to foster emotional self-awareness and “Co-Solve” - a participatory card-based game to help students role-play conflict resolution scenarios.

We tested both of these with our participants at the site, refined them based on feedback we gathered both from seeing the students interact with them, then handed them over to IT for Change along with a documentation of our activities and our research findings for them to disseminate and use further.

CONCLUSION AND LEARNING

In this research, we used design-led participatory approaches and theories from feminist HCI and Queer HCI to understand the imaginaries around masculinity held among rural youth.

Participatory activities were found to be especially helpful in understanding how aggression and emotional events manifested in ways that were situated in time and space. While the participants needed a little time to overcome initial shyness and hesitation, with time they were able to engage enthusiastically with our activities.

The cultural probes again provided insight into how the adolescents expressed emotions through drawn images.

Through these activities, we were able to incite responses from our participants that revealed their implicit perceptions around gender, and aggressive behaviour in their everyday lives. Teachers at the site and IT for Change staff found the activities valuable to their and expressed their appreciation for the materials that we provided.

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